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ABSTRACT

A review of trends in foreign language instruction leads the author to suggest that innovations of a challenging and relevant nature be made in the third and fourth years of sequential programs. He notes that flexible scheduling, independent study, team teaching, and individualized instruction are currently being successfully implemented. Concluding remarks focus on the nature of the Humanities-in-French program of Michigan's Foreign Language Innovative Curricula Studies. Suggestions are offered to those planning to undertake curricular change involving interdisciplinary instruction. (RL)

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BEYOND SKILL BUILDING

A Proposal for Instructional Improvement in Advanced Classes in Modern Languages

by DR. GEORGE T. EDDINGTON

Editor's Note:

The following article is based on an address given by Dr. Eddington at the 1971 Spring Conference of the Foreign Language Association of Northern California, held on March 27 at the Crestmoor High School in San Bruno. Dr. Eddington, Assistant to the Superintendent of The Grosse Pointe (Michigan) Public School System, was Director of the federally-funded (ESEA Title III) state-wide Humanities-in-French program of the Ann Arbor-based Foreign Language Innovative Curricula Studies. The pilot program of the French Humanities project described in the following article was conducted at Grosse Pointe South High School during 1969-68 before it was taken over by school systems in all parts of the country.

When a spot radio announcement paid for by a large private university in the Middle West urges youngsters not to rule out attending a four-year university in favor of a two-year community college because the former no longer has a foreign language requirement, one can hardly be termed an alarmist to state that the entire foreign language profession across the country is in deep trouble. When a university uses such an ominously negative brand of educational public relations to proclaim the absence of a foreign language requirement for graduation as one of its drawing cards, in an era of faster-than-lightning communication, the future of foreign language education appears precarious — to say the least.

What *is* the problem? Why does the foreign language teaching profession find itself in a predicament today?

Obviously, with the entire nation currently plunged into an economic and intellectual depression that varies only by degree from one region to another, no single segment of the profession should regard itself as a prime target in what appears to be an all-enveloping educational disaster of the first magnitude. However, the foreign language teaching profession most assuredly is not receiving any semblance of the consideration shown during the post-Sputnik era. With times changing even more rapidly now than in the 1950's and 1960's, there is a need for the language teaching profession to engage in some serious self-assessment at all levels of instruction.

Among the virtually endless list of changes affecting the profession, the most important may well be the modification of roles played by everyone connected with the educational process. For example, today the student has sought and has received a definite voice in curriculum decision-making. Today's changed posture of teachers as collective bargainers has also drastically affected the school climate. Administrators have modified language requirements at all levels, sometimes in response to pressure. The public's demand for educational "accountability" includes a scrutiny of the total curriculum for which it pays the bill, and it often questions the importance of languages. And, the federal government no longer funds innovative and exemplary demonstration programs as readily or as generously as it has done.

Is there an answer to this dilemma?

Unfortunately, the complexity of the problem precludes a simple answer. A number of possible solutions exist at the different instructional levels that could be instituted to enable the profession to pull out of its current tailspin. The years since Sputnik have seen a vast outpouring of professional writings, research studies, and detailed reports on federally-funded projects — all of which are in the public domain — and all of which contain clues for professional salvation.

With an unfortunate decrease in the number of elementary school offerings in foreign language noted across the country, perhaps the logical place to begin to improve the curriculum is not at the beginning, but rather at the end — or close to the end of the secondary school experience. Foreign languages are *still* a respectable part of the high school curriculum.

Although it may be argued that the American student of a foreign language in the secondary school never *really* gets beyond the skill-building stage, it has been true for decades that a large portion of the curriculum of third and fourth year classes has traditionally been devoted to cultural aspects of the target civilization. Since some groundwork has already been laid in acknowledgment of other aspects of language learning than those strictly of a skill-building nature, the teacher-curriculum worker interested in change and improvement is not faced with advocating the addition of a new course, but rather a reallocation of the time already available. Many school systems seem to have ignored instructional improvement in recent years in their language offerings in grades 11 and 12. During the great period of interest in modern languages (following Sputnik when the government poured vast sums of money into science, mathematics, and foreign languages) most of the funds earmarked for the language area were destined for the development of skill-building — and with good reason, since foundation-building merited nothing less than top priority at the time.

If the final courses in the K-12 language program appear to students to be at least as "challenging" and "relevant" as those offered in other areas of the high school curriculum, it is highly possible that inroads can be made in the currently severe foreign language drop-out rate which shows that more than 90% of the students who begin a foreign language in the first year of high school discontinue their study at the end of the third year.

Will students study foreign languages for the recommended longer sequences if they can see something ahead more vital and appealing than a translation of excerpts from literary masterpieces and a reveiw of grammar? It is my contention that they will — if all concerned along the way (administrators, counselors, teachers, parents) are well enough informed of their new curriculum to encourage students along a road that can lead to a more interesting finale to K-12 foreign language study — and also lay the groundwork for more meaningful work at the college and university level.

What avenues, then, are available to the teacher-curriculum worker who strives to provide his teenage students with a more "relevant" or "challenging" course of study? Much is going on across the country that can serve as a model for improved programs in advanced foreign language training. Foreign language teachers are engaged in programs involving flexible scheduling, independent study, and team teaching. Language laboratories are being used to enrich literature classes, programmed instruction is also being used, some non-graded programs are in evidence, subject matter courses are being taught in foreign languages, Advanced Placement programs are flourishing, language camps and summer language houses are in operation, and there is evidence of individualized instruction in successful operation in a number of districts.

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A project of which I was Director, the Humanities-in-French program of Michigan's Foreign Language Innovative Curricula Studies (funded by Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965), also has relevance for the teacher-curriculum worker interested in improving the scope of his advanced offering in foreign language in the secondary school.

When the curriculum was planned (based, incidentally, on the social scientist's broad concept of "culture") the five general objectives for the daily, two-hour course taught by a team of teachers were:

1. To have students demonstrate gains in proficiency in the four fundamental language skills and to score higher on standardized tests than students enrolled in existing programs for all levels at which the new program is introduced.

2. To have students demonstrate an improved knowledge and application of basic linguistic concepts in French.

3. To have students know significant cultural features of the people whose language they are studying.

4. To have students demonstrate humanistic achievements of the people whose language is being studied.

5. To have students demonstrate increased interest in studying both the language and general culture of the target country through the expanded, in-depth program.

The course that evolved has a scope and depth rarely, if ever, before offered at the secondary level. Nearly every aspect of the target culture receives attention in the curriculum. To gain a suitably comprehensive picture of the Humanities-in-French program, a listing of the major objectives of the seven curriculum units is provided below.

UNIT 1 Introduction to Culture

1. To begin the study of French culture with an in-depth analysis of the French character.

2. To analyze and explain the term "humanities".

3. To introduce the students to concepts of culture reflecting the point of view of the scientist, the linguist, and the man-in-the-street.

4. To begin an anthropological study of the French people.

5. To investigate both the real traits and the *cliches* about the French character.

6. To analyze French thinking and their attitude toward themselves.

7. To study the attitude of Americans toward the French.

8. To begin to familiarize the students with the various genres of French music and art.

9. To begin a comprehensive linguistic study of the French language including a review of grammar.

10. Te begin a program of corrective phonetics for students needing such assistance.

11. To introduce students to in-depth literary experiences, including the reading of complete novels.

UNIT II A Study of Contemporary Youth

1. To conduct a comparative study of French and American youth.

2. To develop an awareness of French social structure.

3. To study the French system of education.

4. To study French family life.

5. To discuss French sports and entertainment.

6. To study the attitudes of the young Frenchman toward religion, politics, morality, war, life, adults, and art.

7. To compare French and American publications for youth.

8. To familiarize students with contemporary French popular music.

9. To teach the students the "art" of French letterwriting, leading to the initiation of a pen-pal project.

10. To establish a school-to-school information program with a French school.

11. To begin a study of French drama.

UNIT III A Study of Values

1. To familiarize the students with French values and their manifestation in the nation's arts and literature.

2. To compare French values with American values.

3. To discuss with students the following values: honor, logic, family, work, liberty, and justice.

4. To illustrate these values by means of literary passages, poetry, painting, songs, and films.

5. To read various novels as manifestations of the French value system.

6. To discuss French cuisine.

UNIT IV Literature as an Expression of Culture

1. To probe the "what", "for whom" and "why" of literature, illustrated with selections from the various literary genres and movements.

2. To study the differences between prose and poetry.

3. To familiarize students with the major French literary works and their authors.

4. To give the students the opportunity to think about and to discuss "great ideas" in French.

5. To develop the students' ability to think and to read critically.

6. To develop the students' vocabulary further through reading and discussions.

7. To illustrate relationships among poetry, music and literature.

8. To discuss the relationship between literature and life.

UNIT V Communications Today

1. To familiarize the students with the various French media.

2. To compare French and American publications as to form, content, coverage, and advertising.

3. To provide the opportunity for students to write their own newspaper in French.

4. To compare French and American radio and television programs.

5. To give the students the opportunity to have their own radio newscast in French.

6. To discuss the cinema as an art form.

7. To show that art is a form of communication and that it is communicated in different ways at different times.

8. To show how a theme in art is treated in different ways, depending on the artist, artistic expression, and the public.

UNIT VI Technology Today

1. To have students discuss today's important technological problems.

2. To familiarize students with some great French achievements in the realm of practical, but particularly theoretical technology.

3. To show the life and the achievements of some great French scientists.

4. To create an awareness of scientific progress of the last fifty years.

5. To show the influence of the United States, all over the world due largely to the nation's technological achievements.

UNIT VII Man and his Environment: A Look at French West Africa

1. To develop a knowledge about French influence in the world, past and present.

2. To become acquainted with West-Africa, a French-speaking area.

3. To study colonialism and its achievements, both good and bad.

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4. To create an awareness of the culture of the African people.

5. To realize Africa's present-day problems.

6. To study foreign influence in Africa today.

7. To create a greater respect for the Negro at home and abroad based on knowledge and understanding of his heritage.

8. To become aware of the great wealth of African literature.

The ideas and themes presented above could be adapted for use as they were written, or as units for independent study in the 11th and 12th grade, or as enrichment activities in the lower grades. Because the daily two-hour block of time utilized during the pilot year presented scheduling problems, the unit topics developed were divided for either the 11th and 12th grade "Highlights in the French Humanities" or "Introduction to the French Humanities" in the 12th grade. If one agrees with the rationale and point of view presented, where does he begin to gather the ammunition he needs for the development of a "relevant" curriculum for his school and his students?

A number of steps, many of them so simple, may be taken by the teacher of advanced language classes as he approaches curriculum change geared to inter-disciplinary instruction.

1. Avoid the initial temptation to "form a committee." Spend at least an hour of quiet contemplation of the problem as you see it, and realistic solutions to it. For example, is your school ready for interdisciplinary teaching? If you can get help from teachers of art and music, how much of your own time and talent are you willing to exchange for their services? Are you ready to work in concert with others on the curriculum and, more importantly, are you willing to be observed by them as you teach?

2. The next step is to investigate the available resources that may provide a clue to solve your problem. Anyone interested in cultural content would be wise to read pages 88-95 of Nelson Brook's *Language and Language Learning* (1964 edition) as a source of ideas. It is one of many possibilities. The total resources of Northern California are as rich as anywhere in the nation — no matter what the foreign language under study.

3. Chat informally with colleagues at the lunch table, listening for cues. Will the government teacher lecture on French politics — if he is knowledgeable? Chat with students — to find out what they might wish in a curriculum.

4. Propose spending a curriculum day or other released time in meaningful brainstorming.

5. Plan an inter-school workshop with similarly interested colleagues.

6. Listen to the community that pays the bill. Support for languages can come from various quarters — some informed and some uninformed — but nevertheless a source of potential support.

Teachers are busy people and the development of a total curriculum without considerable outside assistance may be difficult to achieve. A possible solution in a state with as effective a system of county departments of education as exist in California would be to assign staff members in various schools across the country topics of the curriculum, with a central steering committee assigned the task of coordinating the efforts of all concerned. Dr. Roger O'Connor, Foreign Language and Humanities Coordinator of Contra Costa County is working on such an approach.

In the late 1950's and through the 1960's, foreign language teachers of advanced classes (and others) were urged to innovate "to get themselves out of their ruts." Today, change may be necessary if foreign languages are to survive in the curriculum, as declining enrollments and modification of requirements indicate. Therefore, it behooves every language teacher and every supervisor sympathetic to the place of foreign languages in the school to take a long, hard look at the content of advanced classes and to contemplate the possibility of improvement — perhaps with an eye to an interdisciplinary approach. The individual foreign language teacher, his professionalism bolstered by an increasing number of graduate degrees, his training further expanded at government institutes, and with resources available to him through membership in such organizations as the AAT groups, the Modern Language Association, and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, *can* make an impact!

GEORGE T. EDDINGTON